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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on research that was conducted in a computer-mediated basic writing class taught during the Fall of 1994--the study focused on how computer mediated communication influences students' discourse strategies. The paper discusses how the act of "writing up" a research report constructed the subjectivity of the researcher and one of her participants who were instructor and student in a basic writing class that included contentious synchronous and asynchronous discussions on date rape, gender, and race issues. In the paper, the female participant, who was emotionally and professionally invested in the online discussion, shares her uneasiness about being "written up" and potentially misrepresented. The paper also discusses how the researcher's position as an instructor and a participant in the discussions influenced her analysis and interpretation of the data, leading to a constructed and partial perception of reality. It shows how the information provided by the participant and the language used by the researcher to describe the participant's interactions necessarily resulted in a construction of meaning characterized at least partially by subjectivity and conflicting agendas. The paper concludes by addressing the "shifting, multiple, and contradictory positions" occupied by researcher and participant and by identifying the possible ethical dilemmas resulting from incorporating these positions into the text. (Contains nine references.) (NKA)

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"Writing It Up: A Dialogic Reflection on the Construction of Meaning in Language"

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Language does not provide readers with a transparent access to reality. Instead, as McLaren and da Silva (1993) argue, it serves as a means for constructing rather than discovering meaning. Applied to research we conduct and write up, the language the researcher uses to describe and analyze her participants as well as the language the participants use to inform the researcher also contribute to the construction of meaning. In most instances, the researcher's position is emphasized in the written text, partly eclipsing and oftentimes objectifying the position of the participants which in turn delineates an unbalanced power relationship. Thus, the researcher, in addition to understanding the partiality of the information provided by the participants, also needs to recognize and acknowledge her own partiality (Harding, 1990; Houston, 1992). The resulting text becomes an expression of these partialities, influenced by the information provided by the participants, the researcher's position in the study, her experiences, and her relationship to the participants.

In this paper, I will discuss how the act of "writing up" a research report constructed the subjectivity of the researcher and one of her participants who were instructor and student in a basic writing class that included highly contentious synchronous and asynchronous electronic discussions on date rape, gender, and race issues. The participant, Alba, who was emotionally and professionally invested in the online discussion, will share her uneasiness about being "written up" and potentially misrepresented.[1] The researcher will discuss how her position as an instructor and a participant in the discussions influenced her analysis and interpretation of data, leading to a

[1] Alba provided this information via videotape after reading two articles that used her interactions as a focal point for a discussion of discourse conventions in academic communities. Since I cannot include the video in this paper, I will reprint a transcript of Alba's comments.

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constructed and partial perception of reality. Thus, I will show how the information provided by the participant, and the language used by the researcher to describe the participant's interactions, necessarily resulted in a construction of meaning characterized at least partially by subjectivity and conflicting agendas. I will conclude by addressing the "shifting, multiple, and contradictory positions" (Kirsch and Ritchie, 1995) occupied by researcher and participant, and by identifying the possible ethical dilemmas resulting from incorporating these positions into the text.

Project Outline

This paper draws on research that I conducted in a computer-mediated basic writing class which I taught in the Fall of 1994. The study focused on how CMC influences students' discourse strategies, especially students who are considered nontraditional in terms of ethnic, economic, social, or educational backgrounds. Composition 103 for basic writers, unlike other classes taught at the University, had a diverse student body. African American students constituted the majority (6), followed by Anglo Americans (4), Asian Americans (2), Hispanics (2), an Indian (1), and a Persian American student (1). I used qualitative research methods and situation-based evaluation to study specific interactions in a specific setting and to account for the multiple and interwoven discourse activities used by individual participants in the exchange of ideas. This paper is a follow-up study on the previous project, and it focuses specifically on Alba's reactions to two chapters of this larger study. These chapters draw heavily on information Alba provided during interviews and during several online exchanges. In these chapters, I discussed Alba's background, her position as a nontraditional female student at the university, and her interactions online. Additionally, I focused on the many voices and many literacies that Alba exhibited as a woman, a basic writer, a marginalized student, and an engaged critic of racist and sexist attitudes. Furthermore, I discussed the context-based nature of knowledge acquisition by using several online discussions—one of which dealt with issues of date rape—as the basis

for my description and analysis. What follows, then, is an exploration of the multiple perspectives brought to the study by researcher *and* participant.

I. Being Researcher and Teacher: Being Participant and Student

Teacher research can lead to a number of ethical dilemmas. Before I started my research project, I asked myself many questions about my ability to be researcher and teacher, my students' position as students and as participants, whether my roles in the classroom and as a participant-observer would conflict, whether my students would trust me as a teacher and researcher, and whether my positions would allow me to be fair to my students. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) express similar concerns when they point out that "teacher research...does not have a legitimate place [in traditional modes of inquiry]." Cathy Fleischer (1995) also discusses her reservations about teacher research. Thus, she wonders:

> How can I separate my participant self from my observer self to write about the experience in ways which will be read kindly and seriously and help effect some change? (p. 28-29).

The perceived disadvantages of teacher-research are connected with institutional requirements of being "objective" and "distant" in order to be legitimate. Furthermore, researcher-teachers also have to work towards establishing trust as teachers and researchers, making their roles complementary instead of conflicting. Students also have to contend with their roles as students and participants, exploring whether they are participating in classroom discourse or whether they are participating in a study *about* their classroom discourse. This conflict is increased by asking students to provide more information about themselves and about their experiences at a large academic institution and in the classroom than they usually volunteer to their instructors.

The concerns of the teacher-researcher, however, were not shared by Alba after she had read the chapters discussing her position as a nontraditional student in a "traditional" university. After asking her about being a participant in a study while at the same time being a student, she pointed out:

> I felt excited, and happy that I would be of interest to someone to write about, even though it was like the class, kind of a class, not class paper, well, you wrote it on the whole class and then you wrote about individuals as well. I just felt, I felt happy that I was in it, that I was part of that. I wasn't really concerned about it, probably because I knew you, I knew your character already, just from being in your class, and I wasn't like, I knew you were a good person, and, and you were, and the way you conducted the class, I knew you were fair and objective, and so I wasn't concerned about being misrepresented. (videotape, 8/11/96).

Alba, as he points out, was "happy" and "excited" to be part of the study; she also saw it as an advantage that her teacher was at the same time the researcher. Thus, instead of seeing the possible conflicts Alba emphasizes the importance of the relationship between teacher and researcher. With this, she moves against claims for distance observation and non-involvement of the researcher, arguing for the positive correlation between the two roles occupied by a teacher-researcher.

II. Reading a Text when the Text Is about You

A researcher who engages in ethnography and case studies describes and represents her participants based on her own background and training as a scholar. She interprets and analyzes participants' words, their actions, and the influence of their backgrounds on their present situation. In many cases, she writes about a small part in the life of a participant. Furthermore, the researchers tries to connect the participants with the characters in the

story. Since I used methodologies that try to foreground participants' voices, I anticipated that Alba, the participant, could easily identify with Alba, the character in the article. Alba, the participant, however, reacted differently when she read the account of her interactions in the classroom and online:

> I wasn't evaluating it, I was just reading it, like it was a paper about, about not me particularly, just about how I saw a lot of social issues in here, about how we learn, how our English skills differ, and it just, well, because my major is sociology, and I was looking at it and seeing that it had a lot of sociological perspectives in it, and that was nice (videotape, 8/11/96).

Alba, according to this excerpt, didn't see the "character" as herself; instead, she looked at the representation of "Alba" as somebody else who she considered interesting in terms of her interests in sociology. And although she saw it as an "accurate presentation" she did not identify with the character. Thus, despite the accuracy, the character Alba was not the person I interviewed. Instead, my representation was a static entity which was perpetuated by language. In reality, Alba was a complex human being and also a different person when she read the account of herself. The words that described Alba in the article did not take these changes into account. According to Patricia Sullivan (1996), researchers encounter this dilemma because of the "problem of the 'other.'" Thus, she points out, we need to ask ourselves this question: "How can we adequately transcribe and represent the lived experiences of others—inscribe an other's reality—in a text that is marked through and through by our own discursive presence?" (p.97). Alba did not consider the representation in the article she read as her present reality; instead, it was a reality that was a distant part of her experiences. It was also a reality that only encompassed a short period of Alba's experiences as a student, focusing mainly on one class— which is hardly representative of the participants' everyday experiences.

III. Participating in a Controversial Discussion

Teacher research becomes especially challenging when the research includes transcripts of topics that include controversial and potentially harmful issues. For example, one of the online discussions that became part of the article that Alba read centered on date rape and rape. Specifically, Alba wrote about her own experiences of almost being raped, which in turn led to a heated discussion about whether Alba was telling the "truth." During the exchange, Alba posted the following message:

> ...He said we were going to leave and that he had parked the car somewhere else, we started walking off somewhere weird. I got scared and started to turn back. He grabbed me, put me up against the side of a house and tried to force himself on me. ... (Alba)

Alba's disclosure of her own experiences provoked several critical messages from other participants:

> Alba: Is that EVERYTHING that happened? You didn't lead him on and you didn't know his intentions right. (Alex)

> Alba: Did you know his intentions? I'm not picking on you, I'm just being fair to both sides.. (Langston)

> The man's not here to defend himself so we have only what Alba SAYS to believe. (Langston)

The online discussion took place on the last day of class which made it impossible to talk about conflict resolution in class. I, the teacher, felt very guilty about this discussion and felt responsible for how Alba was treated. In my role as the researcher, I debated for a long time whether I should include this online exchange in my paper. I did, and I

presented Alba as the victim of a society which has a hard time dealing with issues of rape and date rape.

After reading this chapter, however, Alba did not share my interpretation of the interactions online. Instead, she points out:

> I mean, I didn't feel like I was being picked on that, it's just, I mean that is fair, I mean, that is an accurate presentation in your paper, but me, personally, I mean I didn't feel like I, I mean I felt that this was typical, I mean you hear something, you hear responses of that nature, and maybe I never encountered them before, because I never actually sat down and said, well, ok everyone, this is what happened to me. I didn't want people to .... I didn't, because I didn't share that with anybody, but just because I was using that as an example to, to, to discuss my opinion, I mean, I kinda thought that was typical, that's what women, that's what a woman out there campaigning, you campaigning for, you know, for the issue to be heard, not to be distorted, that's why there is people out there who represent all these, uhm, all these, like NOW, I mean that's why there are groups like that formed, because there, people move away from the issue, and not distort it, but maybe focus on something that isn't maybe really of that much value as is the other, the other incident, or the incident itself, and so I kinda thought it was typical, not typical, by I kinda had like a, a taste of what, what women have been campaigning for,and have been screaming out to people to be heard, that you know, why are we moving away from the issue here, and why are we focusing on something that isn't important. ..... yeah, I mean I think, oh, in a way, but I wasn't really, I kinda expected it, I mean it's, I mean we shouldn't, you shouldn't have to expect that, to be typical, and that's what happens, and I really wasn't feeling like I was being picked on because on, because I guess any, I wouldn't like to play the martyr, I just like to, so I wasn't really feeling like that, I was just, what was I feeling? Hmmm,

> they were making me see a different side that maybe, I guess that was the other side, the flip-side of you putting yourself in a situation, I mean under no circumstances should someone try to take advantage of you, but, but, it does show you that you have to be responsible at the same time, so that's what happened (videotape, 8/11/96).

Alba did not feel alienated by the comments and instead points out that this situation is typical for many women and therefore she expected the reactions she received in class. She connects her own experiences to the experiences of other women, thus assuming a role that moves away from seeing herself as an individual victim but instead as a woman who shares the same experiences as many other women who have experienced rape and date rape. Alba's perspective thus did not correlate with my interpretation, showing again the need to discuss the various partialities involved in writing up a study that involves student participation.

IV. Academic Writing and Personal Experience

Academic discourse and the discourse of academic papers is oftentimes different from everyday uses of language in informal and less confined environments. Thus, the language scholars use in writing up the experiences of research participants often differs from the language that these participants use in their everyday interactions, transforming lived experiences into written discourse. Asked how Alba would write about her experiences, she pointed out the approach she would take:

> I mean I thought about how I would write myself and my experiences, and this is like, an academic perspective, I probably want to present my background or myself in more of a non-academic, just how could someone relate to me, I mean this is the way, you know it was like that to, you know, how could somebody relate to this

person, how could somebody relate to these people and what was going on, I mean, and then, you know, ... because we had a lot of diversity in that class, and everybody was of different backgrounds, and you know, this is how society is, this is like reality, this is how people are, they don't agree on things, and you know, they have different opinions and, not everybody defends the same things, and not everybody believes in the same thing. So this does appeal to everyone, but maybe I couldn't have written about maybe, I probably would have wrote about myself and just the classroom experience, about how this helped me be more confident and in my other classes to speak out. I would have wrote more in that perspective, more how, how people reacted to each other (videotape, 8/11/97).

According to Alba, the paper was written from an "academic perspective" which was not how she would have written about her experiences. Thus, although it is a "fair" representation, Alba did not consider it a representation she would have chosen to provide of herself. In this respect, the language we use and the discourse conventions we employ can lead to an inclusion or exclusion of the research participants we study. What I considered "representational research" was less a representation of Alba but more a representation of my interpretation of Alba's actions. This, according to Fleischer, poses a dilemma. As she puts it, "Speaking for others gives us the needed power in the public world to effect change, but it also reduces and may misrepresent the power of the individual life upon which we originated our research" (p. 49).

V. Teachers Researching, Students Participating

Asking Alba about her perspectives on the articles I wrote made me change some preconceived notions about teacher research. I realized that teacher research is a valuable contribution to composition studies, presenting a critical reflection on the practices we

engage in as teachers and mentors of students (see, e.g. Ray, Miller, Fleischer, Cochran-Smith & Lytle). Furthermore, teacher researchers and researchers in general need to adjust their assumptions about representation and see it in relation to the overall experiences of the participants. Specifically, researchers need to realize that they interpret a small portion of a participant's life but do not have access to the world of the participants. Instead, any researcher represents his/her participants in light of the researcher's background, educational training, and ideological leanings. And although the interpretation and analysis might be justified, it might not come close to how the participant would have interpreted her actions. To arrive at a close correlation between writing it up and being written about it is thus necessary to consult with participants throughout the process of writing, making participant feedback an integral part of any research project. Although this approach does not eliminate the partialities and shifting realities brought to any study, it at least allows us to narrow the gap between the world of the participants and the world of the researcher.

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